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Fifty Years Ago

AT FURNACE CREEK INN



*Keepsake No. 17, published for the 28th Annual Death Valley '49ers
Encampment, November 10 to 13, 1977, Death Valley, California*

FIFTY YEARS AGO

at Furnace Creek Inn

By RON MILLER

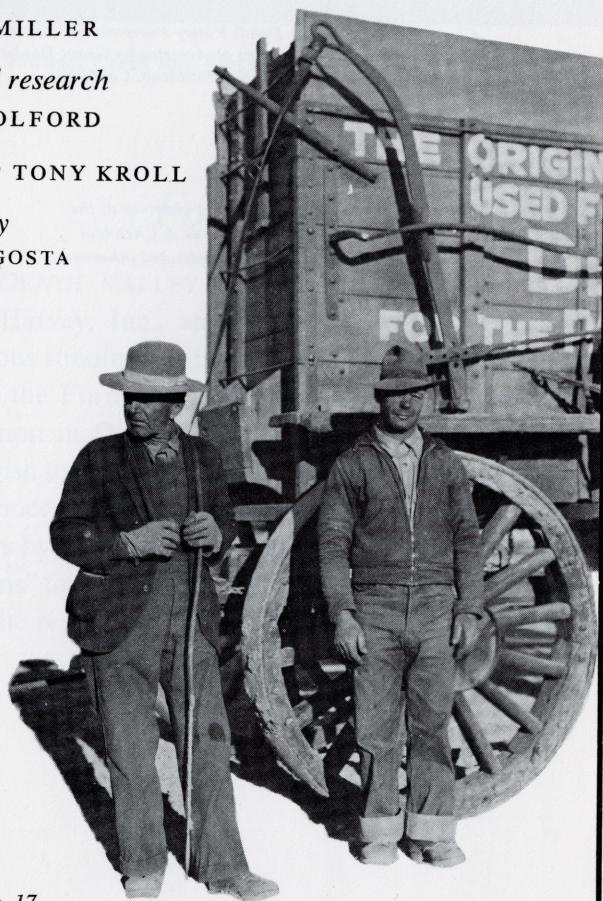
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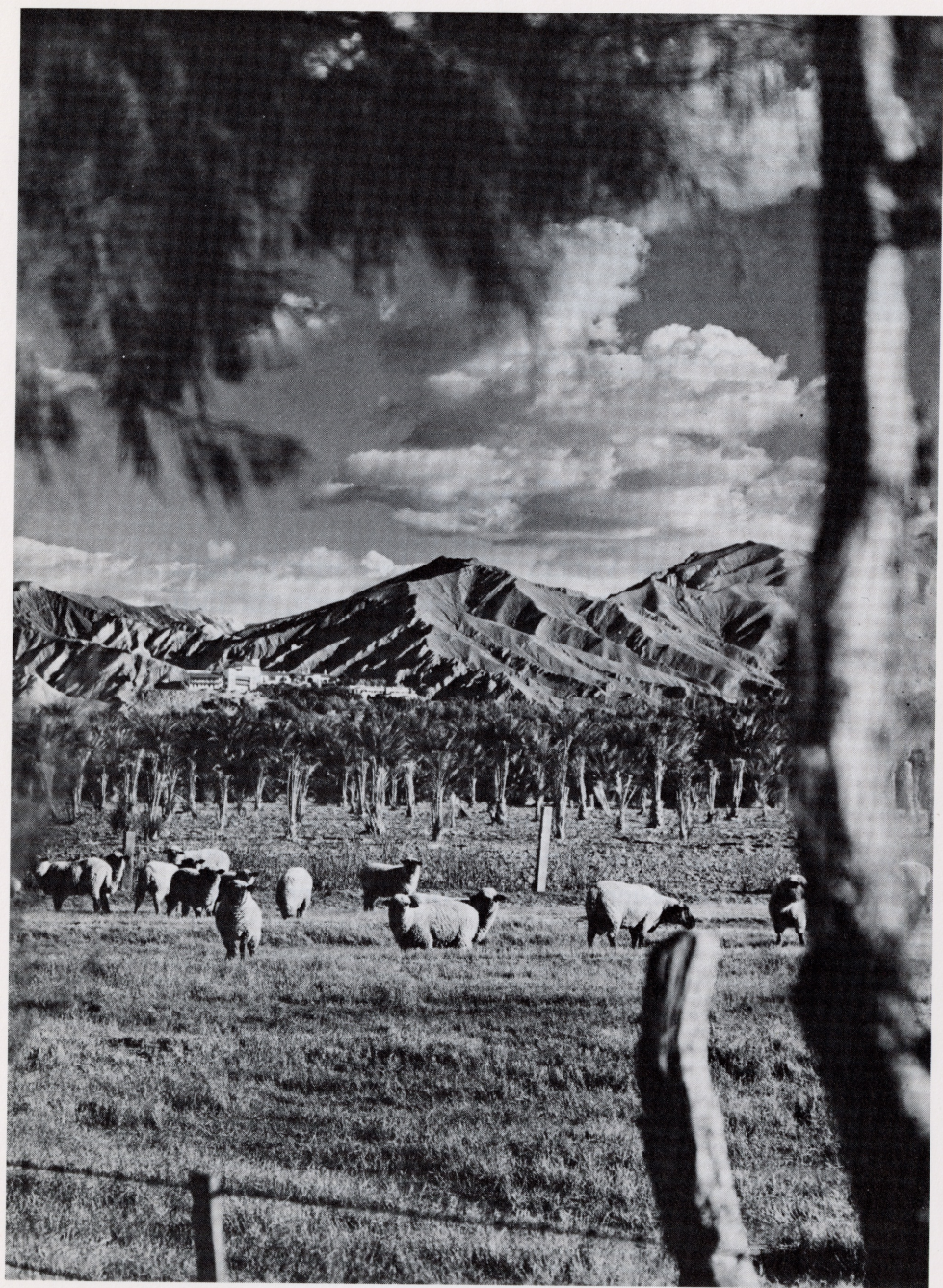
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Furnace Creek Inn. Parking area and stone work.

Foreword

THE DEATH VALLEY '49ERS, INC. wish to thank Fred Harvey, Inc., an Amfac Company, for their generous funding of this 17th Keepsake commemorating the Furnace Creek Inn and its fifty years of operation in Death Valley. In addition, the '49ers also wish to thank Fred Harvey for their public spirit and concern for future generations of Death Valley visitors by their recent donation of the famed "Borax Wagons" to the National Park Service in conjunction with the restoration of Old Harmony Borax Works.



Furnace Creek Inn in background. *Mary Gower Albright photo*



Ryan, California. Passengers arriving in motor coach from Death Valley Junction, 1929.

Fifty Years Ago AT FURNACE CREEK INN

FURNACE CREEK INN, possibly the most uniquely situated hotel in the world, lies at the mouth of Furnace Creek in Death Valley. Here in the desert, the scene of countless tales of adventure, this hotel offers all of the comforts of civilization in the midst of desert waste. Standing upon a knoll at the mouth of Furnace Creek in the Valley, it commands a magnificent view of Death Valley in all directions.

Furnace Creek Inn is an imposing tile-roofed structure, built of adobe bricks, made by the Panamint Indians, who are natives of this section. Briefly described, Furnace Creek Inn consists of a main building containing a spacious lobby and commodious dining room in the middle of the main section. The wings on either side, contain bedrooms all opening out onto a veranda which encircles the entire building.

Thus read the first brochure of the Furnace Creek Inn, Death Valley, published late 1927. Why was this Inn so



Site of Furnace Creek Inn before construction started.

Mary Gower Albright photo



Panamint Indians making adobe bricks for construction of Furnace Creek Inn.

Mary Gower Albright photo

uniquely situated? How did this modern and first-class accommodation happen to be built in an area of magnificent desolation and solitude? More incredibly, how has this Inn survived the fifty years since its inception?

Much was written in the early years of the terrors, desolation, and grandeur of Death Valley. Those stories left upon their readers a feeling of awe and wonder of the beauties so realistically described. More vivid was the impression of it being a place to avoid. Although a place of grandeur, it was also a valley of tragedy and death. However, as early as 1851 men were drawn to the area in search of minerals and were held in the grip of its mystical magnetism. Activity bloomed, with mining companies, railroads, and cartels making this a productive and well-known area. Death Valley had come to the attention of the American public.

Increased public interest in Death Valley during the early 1920's prompted the Pacific Coast Borax Company to explore ways to provide for visitors by utilizing existing facilities at Death Valley Junction and Ryan and constructing a hotel in the Valley. Albert C. Martin was hired as architect for the venture and Nellie Coffman, of Palm Springs's Desert Inn fame, was contacted for advice. The entire project was considered overpriced at \$30,000. Despite hesitation by Pacific Coast Borax Company's Board of Directors, the Inn was built.

In 1926, Frank Jenifer, of the Borax Company, and his wife visited Horace M. Albright, Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park. Jenifer related the Company's plans for promoting tourism to Death Valley and mentioned that he needed a capable manager for the Hotel. Albright replied that he had just the right person in Beulah



Above: During the 1930-31 winter season, Ford Tri-motored airplanes operated by the Curtiss-Wright Flying Service, provided regular passenger service between Grand Central Air Terminal in Glendale and Death Valley.

Mary Gower Albright photo

Below: Harry W. Brown, driver and Mr. Reed in the 1906 Stearns Car in which Mr. Gerstley (Sr.) and John Ryan toured Death Valley in 1907. Scene on Dry Lake east of Indian Springs, Nevada, 1907.



Brown, manager of Old Faithful Lodge. She could bring a whole crew of competent help with her to Death Valley for the October to May winter season, returning to Yellowstone in time for the summer opening of the Park.

The Furnace Creek Inn quietly opened in February, 1927, with only part of its structure completed and without adequate furnishings. Publicity was sparse; even the Auto Club was unaware of the Inn's existence.

By the 1928 season things were different, with spacious accommodations and service by starched and black-uniformed attendants. It was a truly European luxury hotel in the opulent, pre-depression period of American history. It was even more intriguing to the public because of its quiet and desolate surroundings.

Since highway conditions were not good, it was decided to promote the use of the Company-owned Tonopah & Tidewater and Death Valley Railroads as the best transportation medium. The two transcontinental railroads, the Union Pacific and the Santa Fe, agreed to promote package tours and tourist travel to Death Valley from October to May. Travelers would transfer from the transcontinental trains to the Tonopah & Tidewater, riding to Death Valley Junction where they would board the Death Valley gas-powered railcar to Ryan and travel on to Furnace Creek Inn in big seven-passenger open touring cars.

The first tourists to visit the Valley, like the early miners, were caught by its magnetism. On April 25, 1927, H. R. Barnett, managing editor of the *Chain Store Manager* wrote:

I have roughed it with a park, and also camped in Deluxe accommodations all over this part of the country, but nothing ever gave me as much pleasure on a vacation trip



Above: Gas Electric, passenger, mail and express car with Pullman.

Below: Al Riddle driving UP Bus 1930.



as the wonderful accommodations at Furnace Creek Inn. To think that miles away from civilization, in the heart of a wilderness of mountains and desert, one could find the accommodations you people have provided is indeed no less than remarkable.

On March 7, 1928, J. L. Arthur, district superintendent of the Pullman Company made the following comments:

The scenic splendor of the country, together with the pathetic side of the human element which entered that country in bygone days, was beyond my expectations. Even now, I can hardly realize the beauty of the mountain ranges. . . . The Furnace Creek Ranch was a revelation to me, as well as the beauty and accommodations of the Furnace Creek Inn. . . . I can now speak to prospective passengers about Death Valley with some intelligence and can assure you you have made me a live booster for the trip.

Nor was the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Company to be outdone by the Pullman Company. C. J. Birchfield, assistant advertising manager, wrote on February 2, 1931:

Have just returned from my trip through California. One of the 'highlights'—if not the highest light—was Death Valley. . . . Enough can hardly be said for Furnace Creek Inn. The service and the food are A-1.

For fifty years, the visitors to Furnace Creek Inn have enjoyed the same beautiful scenery and the same excellent service. For half a century travelers have been astonished that such an Inn is possible in Death Valley. Those who have visited the Valley with its wonderland of mountains,



Above: Cadillac. Indian Detour at Zabriskie Pt. On left is Mrs. Jenifer and at extreme right is Mr. Jenifer.

Below: Furnace Creek Ranch. Looking east across the meadows, 1892.



valleys, and mirages have left reluctantly but with an inner satisfaction that Death Valley is no longer a land of sorrow, but one of pleasure. Furnace Creek Inn has been instrumental in the forming of this image.

Happy Birthday, Furnace Creek Inn!



The Gower family about to board the Tonopah & Tidewater at Death Valley Junction for a trip to Los Angeles in the 1930's. Long-time Pacific Coast Borax employee Harry Gower was placed in charge of the final construction phases of the Furnace Creek Inn in 1926.

Mary Gower Albright photo



Above: Furnace Creek Inn, 1932.

Below: Furnace Creek Inn North wing, 1934.

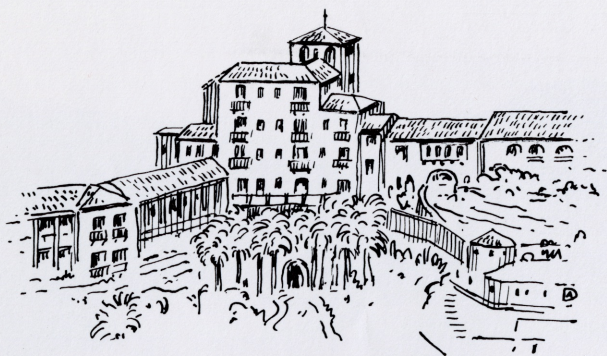




Above: Furnace Creek Ranch. Water storage, Funeral Mountains in background, 1892.

Below: Furnace Creek Inn. Fishpond in Garden. *Willard photo.*





Epilogue

THE FURNACE CREEK INN was seven years old when the Death Valley area was first designated as a National Monument in 1933. Today, fifty years later, this beautiful desert oasis now owned and operated by Fred Harvey, Inc., an Amfac Company, offers its guests superb accommodations in addition to 18 holes of golf, swimming, tennis, horseback riding, hiking or just exploring the many historical and geological features of Death Valley National Monument.

What hasn't changed is the spectacular scenery, the panoramic views and vistas of ever-changing colors that are always present within this unique place called Death Valley.

